Why Does Utilitarianism Seem Plausible?

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WHY DOES UTILITARIANISM SEEM PLAUSIBLE?

John Dilworth
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WHY DOES UTILITARIANISM SEEM PLAUSIBLE?

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WHY DOES UTILITARIANISM SEEM PLAUSIBLE?

I shall be discussing Utilitarian approaches to ethics, understood as claiming that morality requires us (when deciding what to do) to always choose that action which would have the best (or at least reasonably good) overall consequences when compared with any other possible actions one could perform in a given situation.

This general kind of Utilitarianism (U.) is well entrenched in ethics. Though endlessly attacked on moral grounds, such attacks on U. can never be conclusive by themselves. The problem for opponents at a theoretical level is that justifying actions in terms of the benefits associated with their consequences seems generally to be a defensible form of moral reasoning. And a main reason why the U. consequentialist approach to ethics (in one form or another) has been at or near 'center stage' in ethics since its inception is because it is the only systematic and generally-known consequentialist ethical theory.
Hence, those who wish to refute or undermine U. approaches to ethics have several substantial tasks on their hands. First, ideally some disqualifying or crippling ethical or methodological problems would be found in U. itself, sufficient to permanently discredit it. But this alone would not be sufficient, because there is still the problem of how to explain (or explain away) in non-U. terms the many common consequentialist patterns of reasoning in ethics.

More specifically, there is the problem of how to explain those cases of apparently U. reasoning which do seem to be plausible. Even if U. reasoning generally is highly suspect or discredited, U. will persist to 'save' those plausible cases unless some more adequate theory is able to co-opt or reinterpret those cases in non-U. terms.

I am one of those attempting both to refute U. approaches, and to provide some more adequate account of consequentialist thinking in ethics. However, I should emphasize that this is very much work in progress, which is controversial and too recent to have received
much attention or discussion in the profession as yet.

As one might expect, this work arises out of some pervasive dissatisfactions of mine with standard U. theories. I have recently argued that such theories are, by rigorous standards, conceptually incoherent and empirically impossible. The reasons for the incoherence and impossibility of U. center round the completely intractable problems of defining or verifying a set of consequences of an action, and the related problems of assigning values or utilities to all events so that each event in such a set of consequences would have a definite value assignment.

In another recent work, I present an alternative, non-Utilitarian meta-ethical theory which is broadly consequentialist and which hence could potentially serve as a replacement for the discredited U. theories. The general idea is that a morally good society would be one in which we try to reconcile in an optimum manner all of the conflicting interests of people. This activity will generally have good consequences, but other values besides
consequentialist ones will be relevant to judging it as well.

A third paper specifically deals with the theoretical issues of defining a non-U. consequentialism, and contrasting it with the U. kind. In it I note that in the U. consequentialist model, the values of consequences are assumed to be fixed and independent of any moral theorizing. However, it is also possible to view consequences and their values as being partly dependent on moral theorizing in a broad sense (including the development of moral attitudes and interests in a person as part of their moral theorizing), which leads to an alternative conception of consequences avoiding many of the difficulties of the U. concept.

In this current paper I start on the tasks of specific diagnosis and replacement of U. consequentialist forms of reasoning. To simplify things I shall consider only arguments which seem to me to have at least some kind of initial plausibility, and hence to deserve re-interpretation rather than outright rejection.
This should allow me freer rein in initial criticism, with less suspicion of personal malice or bias, since I shall be among those who have to clean up any resultant mess.

Before proceeding, and to avoid any misunderstandings, I should make clear that my criticisms of U. consequentialist reasoning are not a general criticism of all kinds of means/ends reasoning. For example, it is sometimes innocuous to select one or more specific desired ends, and then attempt to work out an effective means of achieving each of them. There is nothing specifically U. about such common instrumentalist patterns of reasoning. But note that even here, if claims were made about the best (rather than merely an effective) means of achieving a goal, similar U.-style problems could arise.\(^4\)

I shall mainly confine myself to examining a few schematic kinds of U. arguments, since my emphasis will be on general procedures for translating such arguments rather than on the specifics of each argument. Also, as someone who finds the same few deadly flaws in all U. arguments, I cannot be expected to muster

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much enthusiasm for what others might consider to be the 'rich variety' of U. reasoning.

In my first paper mentioned above ("Foundational Flaws in Utilitarianism,") I pointed out that since U. itself was fundamentally incoherent and impossible, the only hope for 'saving' U. reasoning was to reinterpret it within some other framework. Perhaps a useful way to start on this is to show some of the specific ways in which the incoherence/impossibility problems undermine the U. status of some standard kinds of U. argument, and hence show a specific need for reinterpretation in their case.

Let us then start with ways in which the impossibility of adequately defining a set of U. consequences shows up as a problem about the status of any supposedly U. 'consequences' we are told about. For example, consider the U. argument that capitalism ought to be pursued in preference to socialism, because capitalist economies produce the best (or, better) consequences.
Perhaps it is fairly clear in this case that the methodological and epistemological problems concerning such a claim are formidable indeed. A scientifically respectable comparison of capitalist versus socialist economies would require large-scale social experiments in which carefully controlled initial conditions, along with capitalist versus socialist factors in each kind of economy, were allowed to develop over sufficiently long periods of time. Also, somehow the economies would have to be kept synchronized or structurally related so that consequences of each could meaningfully be compared.

Self-defeating prohibitions and requirements might also be unavoidable, with requirements of strong control to prevent external or internal interference with the experiment (e.g., no free votes allowing basic changes within a society during the experiment) with a simultaneous prohibition on such interference as potentially resulting in a systematic distortion of any results.

Since the world community has not and perhaps could not conduct any such
experiments, what possible right do we have to claim to possess reliable consequentialist evidence about capitalism versus socialism, when we know that such evidence could only adequately be validated and confirmed by such means?

I think that this is a very good question, so good indeed that the only hope for salvaging anything of the initial plausibility of the U. argument lies in a quite radical reinterpretation of the supposed evidence. But before providing such a reinterpretation, let me bring in another dimension of the problem about the consequentialist evidence.

This other dimension concerning the identification and validation of a set of consequences is connected with the logical issue of completeness. Even if the specific consequences directly concerning capitalism and socialism were validated, there is always the possibility that other consequences might obtrude themselves and have such an overwhelming effect that they would ruin the initial calculations. (This might be called the 'indirect extreme consequence' problem.)
It has actually been suggested that such an indirect extreme consequence may be lurking in our own near future (in this case, a catastrophic one). Various people, including ecologists, have suggested that the very capitalistic successes of our world economy could in their turn doom us to extinction through rapid growth and irreversible pollution problems, so that after all (if this were true) capitalism would not have better consequences (overall) than socialism.

The epistemological problems of U. which these points illustrate are unending. No matter how many consequences of an action we consider, it is always perfectly possible that some further, as yet unconsidered consequence (or consequences) may radically change the overall utility of previously-considered consequences. Therefore it is never rational to give the slightest credence to initial or tentative calculations of utility for a set of consequences. Hence U. calculations are completely useless as a tentative guide to action, just as they are epistemically impossible as a finished, non-tentative guide to what we ought to do.
Overall, then, there are two separate groups of U. problems with the typical large-scale social issues (such as capitalism versus socialism, or other matters of public policy) on which Utilitarians pride themselves as having something worthwhile to say. Their claims about the particular consequences they are interested in are typically unclear and scientifically disreputable or naive, while in the perspective of history their claims are doomed to irrelevance because they are based on only a tiny portion of the potential consequential evidence.

'SAVING' THE PLAUSIBLE ASPECTS OF A U. POSITION

What then can be done to 'save' some plausible aspects or evidence from the U. claims in such a case? Let me make it clear from the start that I shall not claim that any Utilitarian actually meant or intended, nor that the U. claim itself actually means, what I shall suggest is the 'plausible core' of the original U. claim in such a case. Rather my attempt is
to 'rescue' any real value that there might be in an appeal to consequences in such a case, by using a much circumscribed concept of a 'consequence' which is free from the disastrous U. implications.

In order to perform the rescue, the U. kind of consequentialism must be re-interpreted using a different model of consequences. The main distinction in my third paper cited above ("Theory-Relative Consequentialism in Ethics") is intended to facilitate this re-interpretation. I claim that in addition to the U. consequentialist model, in which values of consequences are fixed and independent of any moral theorizing, it is also possible to view consequences and their values as being partly dependent on moral theorizing in a broad sense (including the development of moral attitudes and interests in a person as part of their moral theorizing).

For example, a commitment to justice as part of one's 'moral theory' could legitimately lead one to discount or ignore a course of action producing the greatest average amount of benefit, if the distribution of benefits itself was
unjust. Yet one's concerns could still be largely consequentialist (in a non-U., modified sense), in that good consequences (consistent with one's theorizing) would still play an important part in one's decision as to what to do.

Here then is an outline of a procedure for reinterpreting initial U. claims within a moral-theory-relative consequentialist structure. Recall that strictly speaking, U. consequences cannot offer support to any thesis whatsoever. So our overall task is to find some appropriate non-U. general moral framework, relative to which an adapted and limited form of the supposed consequences could after all support some thesis related to the original U. thesis.

An initial suggestion for arriving at an appropriate moral framework is as follows. Take the broadest distinction or thesis advocated by the original U. claim (e.g., that capitalism has better consequences than socialism). Choose as the required moral framework some framework which is reasonably congenial with or supportive of the position or thesis advocated. (For example,
Consider then, not any actual or potential consequences of capitalism whatsoever, but only very specific phenomena which could be taken to support or confirm (or, not support or disconfirm) the moral theory in question. For example, evidence that some capitalists become much richer or acquire an increasing range of choices would support the theory, whereas the lack of such evidence, or contrary evidence, would tend to disconfirm the theory.

Clearly such consequences deserve to be called 'theory-relative', because their goodness, badness and importance largely depend upon the moral theory being used to interpret them. At the same time, such consequences are also free of the crippling epistemological problems of U. consequences. This is because their value is defined relative to the moral theory rather than having to be associated with some overall set of consequences (as in the U. case). Thus these theory-relative consequences have a definite value whether or not some catastrophic indirect consequences lurk around
the temporal corner.

We have almost arrived at the final translation of the original claim (that capitalism has better consequences than socialism). It will be differently interpreted by supporters of each position. The claim is true just in case, and to the extent that, the appropriate moral theory (either that of capitalism or socialism) is supported by evidence which counts as relevant, relative to the assumed theory.

Note however that the initial apparent factual dispute about which of two systems is best is lost in the translation. This is as it should be, because U. forms of reasoning are (as we have argued) totally unable to show anything whatsoever about which of two systems has the 'best consequences'. The only possible plausible core left is the defence of some moral point of view, which certain kinds of consequential evidence may in fact support.

Let me, however, bend over backwards for a moment in trying to help the U. to 'save' more here. Perhaps the dispute between capitalism and socialism could be partly preserved as
follows. A supporter of capitalism might have, as part of her reason for adopting a capitalism-supporting moral theory, a belief that her total package (a moral theory plus its consequential support) is a better package as a whole than that of her rival the socialist, who adopts a socialism-supporting moral theory along with its supporting evidence. As long as the belief that one package is a better package than the other is held on non-U. grounds, I would not object to this richer account of the 'plausible core', even though the U. position itself is unable to justify any such comparative information.

SOME GENERAL ISSUES

Here are some general issues concerning U. and such translations. First, it could well be objected that replacing a claim (e.g., capitalism has better consequences than socialism) with one-sided moral assumptions about the value and relevance of certain kinds of evidence is tantamount to begging the question, or ignoring the question, in favor of one's own view on the question. I largely agree with this
objection, and it reinforces my point that U. explanations aren’t worth very much (even when translated into their 'plausible core'). Perhaps we’d be much better off if we scrapped them entirely.

Second, even in the best of cases (when there is something definitely worthwhile in the 'plausible core'), the obvious view is that such a plausible core ought to be advanced as an explicit, independent theoretical position supported by some evidence. It should not be misleadingly packaged in the U. way using scientifically and logically naive concepts such as that of 'all the consequences' of an action.

There may also be some interesting implications for ethics teaching for those who agree that the U. approach is fundamentally flawed. If it is, the teaching of U. in ethics courses as a serious theory might come to be regarded as having a similar dubious status to the teaching of "creation science" in science courses. Of course, any ethical theory, no matter how crazy, may have some pedagogical value for critical discussion and dissection, but under the present approach it would be
relegated to the category of tempting fallacies, along with such things as popular conceptions of egoism or relativism (which usually turn out to be an unstable and confused mixture of conflicting factual and evaluative claims).

This is a good point at which to recall the purposes of this paper. Even those who share my uncompromising views about U. should be concerned to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate forms of consequentialism in ethics, and be concerned to preserve and explain what there may be of moral substance in arguments even when they occur as part of a discredited U. framework. There is also the point that intuitions are stubborn, and if not respected and explained they will tend to preserve the framework which gave them birth, no matter how little independent rational support there is for that framework.

BROADER KINDS OF CONSEQUENTIALIST REASONING

The problems raised and translations suggested
in U. cases must now be briefly extended to more general forms of consequentialist reasoning in ethics. U. is usually specifically identified with those kinds of consequentialism in which some maximization principle such as the Principle of Utility is invoked. ("Choose that action which has the greatest utility", we might be told.) However, the deep flaws in U. to which attention has been drawn are flaws in its most basic idea of a set of consequences to each member of which values are assigned. So the flaws are sufficient to undermine any consequentialist assumptions using such a concept, even without the traditional maximization assumption.

For example, if someone were to claim that the institutions and practices of modern societies overall are morally acceptable or legitimate, on the grounds that generally they are good for members of our species, I hope that we can agree that on a careful, accurate interpretation of this as a standard consequentialist claim, this is as close to meaningless as ethical claims can get. Even without a maximization claim (optimality is not claimed, but only acceptability), a chaotic
set of consequences must somehow be defined linking modern societies, what is good for members of our species, some totally unspecified time-frame, the usual threat of secondary consequences which could ruin or change everything, and so on.

Yet as usual the claim seems to have some intuitive foundation and so calls for reinterpretation rather than total dismissal. Rather than invoke something as formal or substantial as a moral theory, let me suggest that in such cases one or more 'moral explanation sketches' might be invoked to explain what is going on.

A 'moral explanation sketch' is some informal, schematic way of tying together some fragment of a moral theory with some relevant theory-relative consequences. If the expected consequences apply then they explain or support the moral theory fragment. For example, here is how to construct an explanation sketch in the present case. Pick some specific aspect of modern life (such as availability of educational opportunities), think of circumstances in which it is potentially
good for humans, then more concretely imagine consequences which fulfil that potential for good. If this overall picture or sketch is confirmed (if there actually are some such theory-relative consequences), then to this extent some truth has been found in the original claim.

It seems likely that in the present case, many different sketches might be required to fully account for the full meaning or implications of the original claim. Here then is another useful translation principle: break up the old, totally intractable claim into several more limited theory-relative claims. This could even give us some kind of measure of the extent to which the original claim was true: the ratio of successful to unsuccessful explanation-sketches could provide us with the desired measure.

CONCLUSION

Though this paper has been presented as part of an ongoing effort to expose and defuse U. arguments, its more positive contributions in attempting to initially identify and support
some theory-relative consequentialist arguments are much more important in the long run. Some of us hope that U. will be 'here today and gone tomorrow', but the whole world of non-Utilitarian, legitimate consequentialist reasoning in ethics will still remain to be discovered and articulated.
NOTES


4. In my "Why Utilitarianism Can't Handle Self-Interest," submitted for publication, I show how the problems could arise in any attempt to calculate the 'best' actions to 'maximize' one's self-related interests.
BIOGRAPHY

John Dilworth is an Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Western Michigan University. Professor Dilworth received his Ph.D from the University of Bristol, England. He has taught at Western Michigan University since 1968.

This paper by Professor Dilworth is one among a series of papers by him, in which he attempts to develop an alternate, non-utilitarian consequentialist ethical theory. Other recent work by him in the area of ethics includes a presentation on "Conflicts of Interest" at the Accounting Ethics Conference, Rochester, May 1993 (to be published in the journal Professional Ethics, Winter 1994), and a paper "Individual Rights Versus Social Rewards and Recognition", published in Gornostaev, Juri and Ray Thomas (1993), Proceedings of the International Conference on Information Technology and People, International Centre for Scientific and Technical Information, Moscow. Professor Dilworth is also the author of the CASES software shell, which displays the case studies produced as part of the three-year
National Science Foundation project "Teaching Ethics in Engineering: A Case Study Approach," directed by Professor Michael Pritchard, Director of the Center for the Study of Ethics in Society.
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